Introduction

Congregation Beth Elohim is flourishing. Our Early Childhood Center is one of the premier programs in New York City, our religious school is nationally known for its bold innovation, our Afterschool Center is a treasured resource for many local families. Our clergy provides exceptional and dynamic leadership, and on Shabbat our buildings overflow with worshippers and eager learners. We have built one program that is a model for outreach to young Jews (Brooklyn Jews) and another program almost unique in attracting Israelis into American synagogue life (Israelis in Brooklyn). We are at the center of our Brooklyn neighborhood, hosting cultural events and initiating social action efforts. We are forging new paths here in Brooklyn for what a synagogue can be in the 21st century.

However, success brings its own challenges. We have not always succeeded in communicating the larger vision behind our growth. Some members of the community haven’t felt fully informed or included. Our operations and our facilities need improvement. And we have far to go still in terms of reaching our potential.

In June 2011 the Board of Trustees decided to establish a task force to create a strategic plan for our synagogue for the next five years.

The Strategic Planning Task Force took as its central aim the composition of a mission statement and a vision statement. We believed that if we could articulate with clarity our identity and our aspirations, then the road map for our future would be clear. We wanted the process to be above all inclusive and transparent, soliciting input from members of the congregation, and along the way building a greater sense of common purpose as a community. Towards that end, over the last ten months, we have sponsored focus groups; interviewed individual congregants; held two open congregational meetings and multiple meetings with staff, clergy and lay leadership and conducted an online survey with 450 respondents. The Board of Trustees has been involved in every step, and by endorsing this plan, takes full responsibility for its implementation.

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of Congregation Beth Elohim, keeping in mind the distinguished history of all those who came before us, sharing with them a common desire to preserve Judaism and integrate it with contemporary life, we look forward to the exciting vistas opening before us.

Mission Statement

Congregation Beth Elohim is a welcoming and inclusive synagogue, proudly rooted in Jewish history and identity, profoundly open to different backgrounds and divergent points of view. We come together to learn, celebrate and worship, honoring each individual’s search for an authentic relationship to the divine. We are a preeminent Brooklyn institution, a spiritual, cultural and intellectual center for Jewish revitalization, fostering community and extending our congregational values of justice, education and inspiration throughout the neighborhoods where we live and beyond.

Our Vision – 5 Fundamentals

Education
We offer exciting and innovative Jewish education, as well as secular educational programming of the highest quality.

Ritual and Spirituality
We provide a sacred space for meaningful reflection, joyful song and enriching Torah study; we seek to maintain and renew the practices and customs of our tradition.

Community
We furnish our members with a web of connections and a sense of home, a place to celebrate our joys together and to help one another in times of need.

Culture
We are a cultural and intellectual hub, a showcase for creativity and a welcoming Brooklyn destination for bold debate about books, faith, current events and ideas.

One People
We reach out to disparate elements of the Jewish world in order that we may come together as one people, emphasizing our shared language, mission, history and tradition and our connection to the Land of Israel; we embrace our responsibility as Jews to be careful stewards of our cultural inheritance, our natural resources and our collective heritage.
Past and Future

The story of Judaism has always been one of inheritance. On Shabbat we give blessings to the God of our fathers and mothers, the God of Abraham and Sarah; we thank God for the love of our parents and we pray for the redemption of our children. We hand our Torah — along with our traditions — down from generation to generation. At the same time we wrestle — constantly — with balancing our devotion to and awareness of our history with our urge to reflect and embody modern priorities and values. In 1907, when the congregation of Beth Elohim joined the Reform Movement, the men abandoned their yarmulkes, a sign of their desire to live “in the world.” In the 1980s, CBE’s head rabbi petitioned the board to be able to put his yarmulke back on, a sign of his yearning to reconnect with the past.

In the broadest sense, this Strategic Plan is an effort to articulate for ourselves in a fresh way the intellectual bedrock from which we engage this struggle — to say out loud who we are as a Jewish community — and to figure out what we will leave behind for future generations.

No one can deny that Reform Jewish synagogue life in the twenty-first century is in crisis. Non-orthodox synagogues all across the country are declining in membership. Many young people reject the idea of synagogue affiliation.

Here at Beth Elohim we are finding a way forward. Our membership has grown 25% in the last year alone — to 790 families, over 2500 individuals, our highest number ever. Our buildings are buzzing daily with activity and enthusiasm. Under the leadership of Rabbi Andy Bachman, the congregation has become a living example of “open tent” Judaism, welcoming every kind of Jew to learn and worship in ways that comfort, challenge and inspire them.

We exemplify what is so exciting about contemporary Brooklyn: a spirit of imagination and intellectual openness matched with the feeling of a close-knit neighborhood. We are a place for parents to educate their children of all ages, a place for adults to come together to learn and take action.

We reject the false dichotomy between a narrow Jewish exclusiveness and a Jewish “universalism” empty of meaning. We are a place that is proudly rooted in our collective Jewish narrative, following our customs, celebrating our ties to the state of Israel, and focusing on the spread of Hebrew literacy.

At the same time we are open to all, especially interfaith families. We are firmly egalitarian and proud of the LGBT families in our midst. We have options available to everyone interested in connecting to Jewish tradition and Jewish community, whatever their background.

We gather together diverse and eclectic groups in a pluralistic Jewish campus. Alshul, an independent minyan, offers lay-led traditional services. Israelis in Brooklyn gives resident Israelis a place to come together to immerse their children in conversational Hebrew and an Israeli atmosphere. We imagine ourselves in the future becoming even more central to our members and our neighborhood: a place to take classes, to hear authors, to sit in a café, to make friends; to breathe Jewish air and imbibe Jewish atmosphere, as we go about our lives.

But we are not merely a boutique offering a variety of options; we are a community, and we have witnessed the unexpected and magical encounters that happen when Jews of different stripes come to know one another. There is creative synergy and there is creative tension. We welcome debate and disagreement. We are not interested merely in feel-good programs, but in trying to explore together a morally and spiritually serious vision for Judaism in the 21st century.

In these difficult times, when the Jewish people are facing so many challenges, we rededicate ourselves to the words inscribed over our Sanctuary door: “Mine House shall be a house of prayer for all people.” With our strategic plan, we say not just who we are but who we hope to become: above all, a synagogue where every Jew has a place. But we aspire also to be a place where we find comfort and inspiration in each other, where we feel safe to disagree with one another with respect and love; where we share the best of our intellectual and cultural traditions and moral values with the community; where we welcome strangers and make them feel like honored guests; where we care for our people and the rest of the world. We use our traditions and the lessons in our Torah to help us navigate the modernity in which we rejoice and live.
Facing Out

Goal: To spread our values and vision; to bring together diverse Jews as one people; to educate and inspire the uninspired.

An “Open Tent” of Judaism: We provide a campus of Jewish life, where all kinds of Jews are invited to participate – secular Jews, interfaith families, religious Jews of different denominations, as well as non-Jews who want to take part in a Jewish community. On any given day at Congregation Beth Elohim, you might find in one room a traditional service with members in tallit davening. In another room, you might see Israeli and American children learning Israeli songs in an all-Hebrew atmosphere. In another room, there may be a novel-reading group or a debate about local issues, an a cappella singing group or a cooking class. All kinds of people coming together to study, socialize, expand our minds and raise our children as engaged, educated Jews.

Furthermore, our activities are not limited to what takes place inside the walls of the synagogue. You can find our members at Rikers Island or John Jay High School doing important volunteer work. We might be sending a Rabbi to officiate at a Shabbat in the Hood – a neighborhood Shabbat dinner in people’s homes, reaching out to those who aren’t members, not necessarily to recruit them to the synagogue, but to support them in their exploration of the joy and beauty of Jewish customs. We find Jews, wherever they are in their lives. We seek to integrate Jewish values with the modern-day complexities of our secular lives.

Recommendations:
• Continue to find new ways to reach out to the unaffiliated.
• Develop a program that does a better job of reaching and engaging teenagers.
• Improve our communication efforts to make sure people are aware of all that we offer.

Deepening our relationship to Israel: As a shared core value of the congregation, our members believe in Israel’s right to exist. We also welcome an open and robust dialogue about the politics of Israel. We would like our synagogue to be a “free speech zone” where all perspectives can be heard, and respectfully debated. Most of all, we believe American Jews should get to know the authentic complexities of Israeli life by traveling there and getting to know Israelis.

Recommendations:
• Establish a plan for at least three annual trips to Israel. Trips designed for special constituencies: family trips, adults-only trips, first-timers, group barmitzvahs in Israel. Community support should help subsidize this travel.
• Developing relationships with like-minded Israeli institutions, promoting interchanges and visits in both directions.
• Increase Hebrew literacy among our congregation. Already we have “Keshet,” an all-Hebrew afterschool program. We are developing new Hebrew immersion bilingual classes for the ECC and summer camp.
• Adult education should emphasize increasing Hebrew literacy.

Tikkun Olam: Seeking to “repair the world” – tikkun olam – is another fundamental value of Congregation Beth Elohim. Over the years we have engaged in discrete projects; most recently, working with families of incarcerated parents through The Osbourne Association and tutoring students at John Jay High School. We believe that by coordinating these efforts more thoroughly, we can bring together congregants of different ages and backgrounds to work on the same projects and create a congregation-wide vision of justice and action in the world.

Recommendations:
• The recently re-formed “Tikkun” committee will identify 3 or 4 broad social action themes to emphasize over the course of a single year – themes that resonate, where we can make a difference.
• A plan to coordinate “social action” projects across programs, including Yachad and Academy, to get families working together on the projects of the congregation.
• Provide information about volunteer opportunities for members.

Expanded Education: We have established two very successful educational programs in our neighborhood: The Early Childhood Center and the Afterschool Center. The Afterschool Center has started recently to pilot off-site programs at different public schools in the neighborhood. We feel that over the next few years, we should examine expanding both of these programs.

Recommendations:
• Expand the ECC as much as possible within the confines of our current buildings.
• Form a task force to explore the long-term potential of adding off-site facilities for a secondary branch of the ECC.
**Looking In: Community**

**Goal:** To develop deeper bonds among our members

People join a synagogue for many reasons, but the desire to be part of a community ranks high among them. On that count, we can improve. Our members want to get to know their fellow congregants, and while they prize the diversity of Congregation Beth Elohim, they often feel isolated in their “silos.” They want more activities to participate in as adults, and not just as parents. They are excited about the visionary possibilities of this new kind of synagogue we are creating here in Brooklyn, but they want to make sure it continues to be a warm and neighborly place. If we do continue our rapid growth, as we anticipate, we have to work doubly hard to make sure we provide the most essential thing: a sense of home.

**Shabbat & Holidays:** We’ve succeeded in providing an amazing array of diverse services and classes on Shabbat. We should create more opportunities to socialize and bring the community together.

**Recommendations:**

- Regular potluck dinners after Friday evening services. Focus sometimes on specific “themes.”
- Also Shabbat lunches along the same lines.
- Structure holiday programs to involve more people of diverse ages and backgrounds working together.

**Overlapping “silos”:** We intend to find more ways to bring together congregants from different “groups” and different generations.

**Recommendations:**

- The staff should coordinate different groups coming together for specific purposes, e.g.,
  - to co-sponsor an event or combine efforts on a project.
- Programs in adult learning and social action should be designed with community-building as a central aim.
- Sponsor social evenings to bring people together. For example, “block parties” where hosts are given lists of all the CBE members in their immediate block or area and can then invite them all to a cocktail party in their home.

**Integrate New Members:** We’ve had a tremendous influx of members — over 400 new member families in the last five years. We need to integrate them.

**Recommendations:**

- New and longtime members should be introduced to our listening campaign (“Mishkan”) so we can get a sense of their concerns.
- New and longtime members to be invited together to meet in small groups with the clergy for organized sessions of Jewish learning.

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**Cultural Hub**

**Goal:** To establish Congregation Beth Elohim as a Jewish cultural center for Brooklyn as well as a synagogue.

Congregation Beth Elohim will always be, first and foremost, a synagogue. But as our predecessors who built the temple house in 1929 recognized, for Reform Jews in America, the experience of Judaism involves more than worship. This is why they built the Temple House with a pool, and why they sponsored boxing matches and theatrical performances in the ballroom. Congregation Beth Elohim has always been a gathering spot in the neighborhood, a place to discuss important issues, to seek out experiences of enlightenment on matters both secular and divine.

Meanwhile, Brooklyn has become the center of the contemporary zeitgeist. Younger people flock to our borough, and many of our most creative and interesting neighbors happen to be members of Congregation Beth Elohim. However, Park Slope and its environs do not have any kind of Jewish Community Center. There is a need for a space conducive to open debate and discussion, readings and recitals. With our central location, our traditions of cultural offerings, and our wealth of multipurpose spaces, Congregation Beth Elohim is well positioned to fill this void. Our members themselves provide a great resource for arranging fascinating speakers and guests.

Expanding our cultural programming serves two other purposes. It provides activities for our members, particularly those who want to interact as adults, and not just as parents, and these are activities our members seem to be very interested in, according to our survey and focus groups. In addition, our presentation of such events brings new people into our buildings, adding energy to our efforts, and in some cases, inspiring them to join the synagogue as members.

In the first half of 2012, we have had a series of successful events around films and books, attracting up to 400-500 people per evening. We need to build our capacity, year by year, to have an organized series of events, with an appropriate budget for marketing and capital improvements. As we progress, we will learn more and more about what kinds of events succeed here.

**Year 1 Recommendations:**

- Explore fund-raising potential for cultural programming in the 2012-2013 fiscal year.
- Develop a schedule by September 2012 for the year to come; publicize the schedule as a whole.
- Create a series of panels on books, interviews with authors and forum on political and social issues, local and national.
- Present a series of musical performances.
- Build up regular events on certain days so staff and audience can plan far in advance— e.g. the first Thursday of every month is an interview with an author.
Year 3 Recommendations:

- Explore other uses of our spaces, including a film series, events focusing on other topics of interest to our members such as personal finance, theater and food.

- Develop skills or crafts activities and workshops that bring members together. Examples include cooking (or Jewish cooking) classes; sewing; dance classes.

- Explore possible partnerships with local cultural groups, such as Celebrate Brooklyn!, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, music venues such as Barbes, the New York City Opera, or Brooklyn Academy of Music.

- Develop short-term and long-term plans for upgrading our infrastructure and staff so that we can present cultural events with the utmost professionalism.

- Create a free publicity and social media marketing strategy for getting the word out about cultural events more effectively for existing members and to get beyond the membership to the rest of Brooklyn.

- Develop an expense model to determine the costs of different types of events — costs for security; electricity; publicity; food; etc.

- Consider developing a pricing model for determining whether or how much to charge for certain events.

Year 5 Recommendations:

- Consider forming an independent 501(c)(3) for cultural programming.

- Consider creating a distinct brand identity for these efforts.

Communications

Goal: To inform our members, and the world around us, of all we do

CBE endeavors to be a warm and welcoming place, but one frequent critique we have heard is that the synagogue does not do enough to engage all its members, to invite them through the doors and guide them through its very broad range of programs and activities. Even though almost everyone in the synagogue expresses a desire to know and connect with more people, members nevertheless tend to encounter mainly other members in their own age and stage-of-life cohort, and rarely reach beyond their silo. Regular emails and posted signs of upcoming events and offerings seem not to be enticing or resonant enough.

Better communication across the board — within the community, among different groups in the community, and with the neighborhood at large — would facilitate the kind of exchange that members say they so desire. It would increase engagement and commitment within the community and enhance CBE's visibility in the world and its relationships with its neighbors and important cultural and municipal organizations.

Recommendations:

- Increase/enhance social media presence: If CBE hopes to entice more young people to join, especially singles and couples before they have families, it needs to become much more sophisticated in its use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. With these tools, it can target its messaging to specific groups, and disseminate short bursts of necessary information (such as times and dates of events) efficiently.

- Better signage throughout the building: Strangers to the building would benefit from clearer signs establishing where they are and directing them to where they want to go. Members would benefit from a up-to-date directory of the day's events at a glance — perhaps an electronic screen—outlining which groups are meeting where and at what time. We should also publicize our events better within our buildings.

- Media Relations: Put together a group of members with communications expertise to create a high-quality press packet. As CBE and its leaders increasingly receive the attention of the local and national press, the synagogue should respond professionally with materials that describe who we are, what we do and why we are different from other synagogues.

- Targeted emails: Some members feel they receive too much email and they delete it without reading. The email blasts and weekly advisory need to be tailored to maximize efficiency: i.e. going to the right people with the right information and no more.

- Peer to peer outreach: Establish a program in which 40 designated “Connectors” each take 20 members of the congregation to keep informed, to update them on events and answer any questions they might have.
Testing Vision Elements

We wanted to test whether our concepts are supported by our members and which matter the most to congregants. A large majority of members supported each one of our four vision elements, but the most popular was “A strong sense of community.”

For those statements which you indicated you agree or strongly agree, choose on that you would rank as your highest priority for CBE moving forward.

- 1. We aspire to offer exciting and innovative Jewish education, as well...
- 2. We aspire to provide a home and a strong sense of community to...
- 3. We aspire to be a cultural and intellectual hub, a showcase for...
- 4. We aspire to reach out to disparate elements of the Jewish world...

Expanded Cultural Offerings

The most popular proposed activities were “live music performances” (89%) and “discussions of politics and literature” (95%).

Might you be interested in these activities if they took place at CBE?

Facilities: The Road Ahead

Goal: To improve our facilities so that they better serve our mission and vision.

In order to implement our strategic plan, we need to upgrade our facilities. Our historic buildings are potentially magnificent and yet in their current condition unsatisfactory, both functionally and aesthetically. Ideally the facilities would support our mission and vision and allow our programming to flourish and grow unimpeded. In addition, we believe our buildings, if used properly, could be an important source of revenue for Congregation Beth Elohim, and contribute to our long-term institutional stability.

In recent years we have started to concentrate more fully on the renovation of our physical infrastructure. Our first priority must always be to maintain its functionality. Our successful “Journey Home” capital campaign in 2011-2012 has focused on making our buildings safe and water tight. We have already completed a new roof and dome for the Sanctuary. Next we will repair the façade and windows for the Sanctuary and the Temple House. We believe our facilities should serve and represent our vision. They should be accessible and welcoming, open to all and include spaces for socializing and community building. Their rooms should be flexible so that our building can integrate all the different activities we conduct. The architecture and design should communicate our values of creativity, inclusion and excellence, and create an atmosphere that encourages those qualities.

Confronted by so many challenges and under utilized opportunities, we must be decisive about the path ahead. Thus the strategic plan shall here put forth recommendations for the next phases of our capital project, as articulated by the Task Force and the Board of Trustees. A newly-constituted Planning Committee and the House Committee, under the direction of the Board, will decide over the years exactly how and in what sequence these recommendations will be enacted, based on available funds and other contingent factors.

Building this vision will require hard work, time and money; it will depend upon the participation, enthusiasm and commitment of our members and our ever-widening circle of supporters. Success, when it comes, will arise out of the profound community we will have built and its unique value to Jewish life today.
Recommendation:
An elevator in the Temple House is an absolute necessity. It will be the spine of the building and it will make every floor of the building accessible to all, a fundamental goal as a moral commitment. It will make the ballroom a more attractive place to hold functions and events. It will save us money and time in terms of building maintenance. It will open up access to the fifth floor with all its manifold possibilities.

Recommendation:
Cosmetic and aesthetic improvements to communal spaces in the Temple House, both for the sake of members who use the spaces on a regular basis, and in hopes of attracting more use as rental spaces.

- Redo the bathrooms on the first and second floor
- Cosmetic and functional upgrades to the ballroom and kitchen
- Rethink utilization of ballroom “stage”
- Cosmetic upgrade to social hall, location of strollers.

Recommendation:
The entrance to the Temple House is the first impression people have of Congregation Beth Elohim and right now it is neither welcoming nor attractive. We hope to find a way to construct a graceful entrance that leads into an inviting lobby. The lobby should have seating so that people feel this is a place they can socialize. It should be a place to have festive onegs, and perhaps there could be a café.

Recommendation:
We have an unutilized resource on the fifth floor — a rooftop with spectacular views of the Manhattan skyline, as well as 2500 square feet of interior space. This floor should be renovated in such a way that it can be used for multiple purposes: a play space for the children, fitness classes for adults, religious services and events. It could also be a wonderful venue for members' parties, as well as a real source of rental income for the congregation.

Recommendation:
We will eventually need to turn to the interior of our sanctuary. There is a growing consensus in the community: we must find a way to make it a more flexible space, useful on more than a few days a year, without sacrificing the historical integrity of its aesthetics. Hopefully our restoration will bring out its fullest potential as a functional space of transcendent beauty and inspiration.

The Strategic Planning Task Force  2011-2012

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